

Virtual places, real money: the role of virtual worlds in the success of video games as cultural products

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To start with - some significant pieces of data

On September 25th, 2007 Microsoft and Bungie Studios released *Halo 3* and in less than 24 hours the game made more than \$170 million dollars, leading Microsoft to proclaim it 'the biggest entertainment launch in history.' (*'Halo 3' 2007*) Since that date, *Halo 3* has gone on to sell nearly 10 million copies (9.73 million as of June 2009). (*'Worldwide Total Sales' 2009*) In addition, *Halo 3* has also been one of the most heavily played online games in history. On May 1, 2009 Bungie announced that four players had participated in *Halo 3*'s one-billionth match. Over those billion matches more than 9 million players (Wade 2009) had clocked over 2 trillion seconds of playing time, which comes out to more than 64 thousand years. (urk 2009)

On another note, Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. announced on October 28th, 2008 that its massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, released in 2004, had exceeded 11 million subscribers for the first time. (*'World of Warcraft' 2008*) Considering that *World of Warcraft* requires a monthly fee of 15 USD, it is a safe bet that over the course of a year Blizzard Entertainment now earns close to 2 billion USD in revenue from these gamers. In addition to subscription revenue Blizzard has also been able to count on the earnings from the sale of software needed to play the game, of which 14 million copies (as of June 2009) have been sold at approximately \$50 USD apiece. (*'Worldwide Total Sales' 2009*)

This type of economic success is representative of the worldwide video game industry as a whole, which has seen record-breaking growth over the past five years. Sales of video games and game consoles have nearly doubled since 2002 reaching 41.9 billion USD in 2007, and with continued growth expected sales are forecasted to reach 68.9 billion USD by 2012. (Caron 2008) These staggering numbers are reflective of the reality that video games are an increasingly important part of not only the daily entertainment choices of consumers, but also the global cultural economy as a whole.

Considering the increasing importance of video games in our culture we must therefore approach games both as aesthetic objects and as products situated within a cultural marketplace. I will discuss how the elaboration of fictional worlds within virtual spaces has been central to the expansion of video games simultaneously as cultural objects and cultural products. By looking at the importance of this type of world building in determining the success of a game's design and in determining the longevity and profitability of gaming properties, I will show how the development of immersive and entertaining virtual spaces has played a role in both the recent aesthetic evolution of games as an art form and their ascent to prominence as cultural products within the global marketplace.

Building game worlds

The creation of art and culture is in most, if not all cases, one of world building. When a novelist writes a book, he composes a world for the reader in which the characters and plots can exist. Similarly, a painter must imagine not only the shapes and colours within the boundaries of the work but also the history behind the moment he intends to paint, the possible futures for that space, and the world that exists beyond the boundaries of the canvas. And in film, the director and cinematographer use exposition and establishing shots that allow the viewer to imagine a rich world that extends beyond the limitations of the screen.

World building is as critical to a successful video game as it is in any of these other art forms. In fact one could argue that the interactivity that is so central to the video game experience makes the creation of a thorough, expansive and immersive world even more important. For instance, let's compare and contrast the comprehensive construction of space and place in both film and games. The specific details of the world in each shot or frame of a film must be more precise and comprehensive, as the specificity of film presentation demands a certain scale of presentation and very high-resolution imagery. But the director need only construct the facets of the world that he plans to portray on a screen. Only half a room or the facade of a building needs to be constructed in order to accommodate the planned shot for the film, because the other half of the room or the inside of the building may never be seen in the film.

In a video game however, the self-determinacy of the interactive player allows for a freedom of movement and exploration of the devised world. Therefore that world

must be more completely realized. This condition is true whether that world is cartoonish and simple in its structure, as in the Nintendo racing game *Super Mario Kart* where simpler environments provide a backdrop for the playable race tracks, or completely realized and lavishly detailed, as in *Grand Theft Auto IV* which takes place in a highly detailed fully explorable area approximately the size of New York City. In addition to filling the space of these worlds for the character to move within, good game design takes into consideration that these spaces must be places that ensure that as the player continues to progress through the game, he will constantly be having new experiences, and remain invested in staying immersed within the game world.¹

The distinction between space and place here is important as the key to a successful game is the creation of an environment and story that is compelling enough to keep the gamer invested in participating in the world of the game. Those games that are most successful and achieve both economic success and critical acclaim are able to balance compelling environments with challenging game play and an intriguing story.² In this sense the features of game play and story add to the sheer geography of the virtual space to create a more realized and complex place for the gamer to inhabit through his character.

The importance of the generation of places full of interesting characters to be met, and experiences to be had, is readily visible in well-known and broad-scoped games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Fallout 3*, which provide hundreds of square miles of territory to be explored, a seemingly endless number of computer controlled characters with whom to interact, and more than fifty hours of possible gameplay. But it is also true of much smaller games. For instance, the game *Braid*, a side-scrolling game available through the Xbox 360 Live Arcade, gained almost universal acclaim for its balance of unique gameplay, visual composition, and storyline. The creator of *Braid* was able to combine a complex and nuanced application of time and spatial mechanics in relation to character movement with a highly stylised visual

¹ Alison McMahan notes that there are three important conditions which must be met to maintain this immersion in 3-D environments that could be applied to all game environments: "(1) the user's expectations of the game or environment must match the environment's conventions fairly closely; (2) the user's actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent, even if they don't match those of 'meatspace'." (2003: 69)

² For the sake of this discussion we will consider story in a broader sense and not solely limited to a traditional narrative. This is because while a traditional narrative is the structure for most games, such as highly-regarded *Bioshock*, there are many games, such as *The Sims*, where the story of the characters is determined very closely by the gamer as he determines the path of his character's life. In such a case, story is still important although a narrative is not followed because it is the capacity of the user to generate an interesting story on their own which makes the game compelling.

design and a simple yet poetic storyline to create a fully realized world. Although relatively short in duration to the expansive titles mentioned above *Braid* was able to provide the same kind of complete world for the gamer to inhabit.

From these few examples we can see that great games usually occur in great places. Therefore it is important to consider how the components of space, gameplay, and story are constructed in any game when reflecting on its quality as both a work of art and a cultural product. However, the idea of place in games is not necessarily only a characteristic of story-driven games, and if we look past the spaces of individual games we begin to see how important the expansion of virtual places beyond traditional gaming experiences has been significant in the recent radical increase in the importance of the gaming industry.

Marketing game mythologies

Returning our discussion to our initial examples of *Halo 3* and *World of Warcraft*, we can begin to see the importance of the elaboration of compelling virtual worlds in the successful development of powerhouse franchises of this ilk. First let us consider the importance of *Halo 3* and *World of Warcraft* being parts of larger franchises. *Halo 3* was the third game in a trilogy of first person shooters that has since spawned two further games. *World of Warcraft* on the other hand was built upon the *Warcraft* franchise, which originated with three real time strategy games with very different gameplay mechanics than the MMORPG. As part of larger game worlds both of these games represent either a historical or geographical subset of larger game worlds. The impact of this characteristic of each game is that the virtual worlds they take place within are more layered than a game that exists in isolation.

In the case of *Halo 3*, the game was the conclusion of an evolving story in a virtual world that over the course of three games was able to develop, not only a geographic specificity, but also a cultural history involving numerous alien races. By this third installment gamers were already familiar with the main protagonist Master Chief as well as the Covenant, an army of multiple alien species, and the Flood, a parasitic galaxy-threatening force. Gamers were also familiar with the planetscapes, architecture, and even the military traditions of the different forces. This background provided the developers with a rich armature upon which to add new plot twists and game play experiences, thereby making a rich and familiar space even richer and more compelling.

World of Warcraft on the other hand was a new type of game with a new type of structure for the *Warcraft* franchise. Nevertheless the developers at Blizzard were able to transport many of the story lines from the previous *Warcraft* games as well as characters, races, and locations. The abundant material has proved to be important to the success of *WOW*, because it provided a strong foundation for the development of an immense virtual universe covering multiple planets and including a diverse range of climates, landscapes, races, and cultures, all which play an important role in keeping the universe diverse enough to keep millions of users coming back for more.

In considering the construction of space and thereby place in the *Halo* and *Warcraft* games, it is important to recognize a characteristic that each share in the construction of their virtual world that has allowed them to transcend the borders of the gaming community, enter into the discourse of popular culture and become economic and cultural juggernauts: a mythology for their gaming world. In this case, mythology refers to the complex webs of histories, locations, and characters that create the cross-textual fabric that makes cultural franchises such as *Halo* and *Warcraft* so successful. Perhaps the classic popular culture example for these types of franchises is *Star Wars*. The *Star Wars* universe has thrived and persisted because of the amount of time and energy that has been spent perpetuating and enriching the universe first articulated in George Lucas's original three *Star Wars* films. Through books, television shows, video games, merchandise, other movies, theme park rides, etc. the *Star Wars* universe has continued to grow for over thirty years, engulfing multiple generations in what is probably the most thorough and comprehensive popular virtual place, a place that existed a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

The significance of *Star Wars*, and its amazing economic successes, as a model for franchises such as *Halo* and *World of Warcraft* is no small thing because it highlights how closely tied this kind of world (or galaxy) building is tied to the economic factors that drive these kinds of cultural products. Just as the *Star Wars* galaxy has been expanded and marketed through other media, *Halo* and *World of Warcraft* both franchise numerous book titles attached to them, along with a presence in comic books and graphic novels and have burgeoning merchandise collections. In this sense, these two franchises have been recognized as the types of unique intellectual properties that attract the kind of audience that is drawn to this type of mythological expansiveness. As these virtual worlds become recognized as places ripe for long-

term development, both within their core medium of video games, and across other media, there is more investment in the continued articulation of that virtual world. We can see this long term development in video games already as the *Halo* universe has spawned two additional games *Halo: Wars* and *Halo: ODST* with a third already in the works. The original *World of Warcraft* has already been expanded twice with *The Burning Crusade* and *Wrath of the Lich King* with more expansions in the works. Furthermore, there has been serious consideration as to how to maximize the profitability of these properties in other prominent media, and there have been rumblings about movies for both.

This kind of franchising has become an important part the increasing importance of video games because it allows game developers to reach more audiences and through films, books, comics, and television, expand the exposure of the games as a brand. Other video gaming franchises have reached into other media with games such as *Doom*, *Resident Evil*, and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* having been made into live-action movies, although a true blockbuster movie based on a game has yet to manifest itself. Similarly, games have often borrowed from films and expanded on their places on mythologies, as far back as *Tron* and as recently as *Terminator: Salvation*. The importance of these developments in the continued consideration of gaming properties as profitable and vital to the cultural marketplace cannot be understated as video games continue to be resituated within cultural hierarchies of economic and cultural value. This is especially true considering the relative youthfulness of video games as a medium and the fact that history has shown that as media mature they tend to gain acceptance across a wider spectrum of audiences. But, just as these similarities between video games and other media are important to their expansion as cultural products, it is one of the unique characteristics of video games' more unique characteristics that may prove to be the most significant and differentiating: online social space.

Online social space: the great persistor

There is no shortage of good recent scholarship on the importance of online interaction in video gaming, as it has rightly been recognized as one differentiating

characteristics of the medium.³ In particular this scholarship has focused on the representation of the individual and the experience of identity, gender, and embodiment online with others. For the sake of this argument, however, I would like to think of online social space from a slightly adjusted perspective that will be more in line with virtual places and worlds. In particular I would like to consider how the online social features of the virtual spaces of *Halo 3* and *World of Warcraft* have been critical to the success of these spaces as persistent worlds that, are not only compelling because of their immersive construction, but also because the presence of other players adds a continual variability that allows the spaces to persist and even exist beyond their predetermined storylines outlined by their developers.

Halo 3 with its millions of online competitors participating in team competitions and death matches is able to keep gamers participating in its virtual world for a long time after they have completed the relatively short five hour story-based campaign. A combination of refined competitive gameplay, unique tools for the creation, recording, and playback of different online experiences, and a strong connection to the places and cultures of the *Halo* universe create a unique synergy that has yet to be matched by other video games. *Halo 3* has become the precedent setter for console-based virtual worlds that combine rich more traditionally story-based universes with unique online social experiences. The combination has made the *Halo* universe popular and culturally persistent far longer than similar first person shooters, and is a powerful example of not only the creative possibilities of this type of video game, but also the enormous economic potential these types of properties possess.

World of Warcraft on the other hand works just as successfully if not more successfully than the *Halo* games, but almost in reverse. Whereas *Halo* was successful as an individual experience first, and then burgeoned as an online environment, *World of Warcraft*, after borrowing some source materials from earlier *Warcraft* games, began as an MMORPG predicated on the fact that online social interaction would play a strong role in defining the dynamics of the spaces players would inhabit. Understanding that such a vital gamer-based world would be dependent on a persistent world that gamers would find interesting and compelling, Blizzard crafted story lines, and experiences within the game that could be played like a single-player game to allow each player to not only experience the history of

³ Jim Rossignol's *This Gaming Life* (2008), Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron's *Video Game Theory Reader* (2003), and Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrington's *First Person: New Media as Performance, Story, and Game* (2004) all provide good materials on subjects relevant to this discussion, such as online communication, identity construction, and embodiment.

the world but also build a rich history for their character over many hours of gameplay. This comprehensive elaboration of the space in multiple directions (single player experience, multi-player experience, player vs. player experiences) then coalesced to form an incredibly rich environment that brought players back again and again and allowed them to add their own experiences to the increasing diversity of the social spaces that helped define the *Warcraft* universe as a place inhabited by numerous gamers in the best way possible.

Conclusion: add it up

Looking at the earnings of *Halo 3* and *World of Warcraft*, it becomes quickly apparent that video games are a very real economic force, and thus cannot be ignored as important cultural products. Taking this into consideration, alongside the analysis of the carefully devised and thoroughly constructed and populated spaces of these games, shows us the importance of place in creating compelling immersive experiences for gamers. So, as video gaming grows as a medium and individual games come to have a greater impact as independent cultural products it is likely that we will see that successful games will share the characteristics of a combination of elaborated spaces, challenging gameplay, and compelling stories within the context of both individual and social experience.

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